

Befriending Our Generational Neighbours

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Three ways to bridge the leadership gap

Nana Yaw Offei Awuku & Ole-Magnus Olafsrud | 09 Aug 2021



Generational differences are a great challenge—but also a hopeful opportunity for unlikely gospel friendships to bloom.

Recently a younger leader was invited to join a Lausanne regional team. After her first meeting, she texted a group on WhatsApp that she needed encouragement because ‘those guys are *old*.’

The challenge of generational integration in leadership is felt not only in Christian ministries and organizations but in every workplace. In fact, a recent Generation Index survey indicates that 77% of workers consider ‘different work expectations across generations’ a significant organizational challenge.^[1]

With nearly six or seven generations living together in our global community today, the transitioning across the Greatest (1901-1927), the Silent (1928-1945), the Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1995), Gen Z

(1996-2010) and Gen Alpha (2011-2025) have come with dynamic ocean-wide shifts. In some respects, the ideological, sociological, economic, and technological revolutions have shaped our generational reality into neighbouring strangers.

While globally-impacting occurrences like COVID-19 have come with shared experiences across all generations, more often the generations are like very different teams playing with differing competitive rules on the same field. As an example, Africa today is the youngest continent in the world with some 60% of the total population under 25 years old, but the continent is also mostly led by some of the world's oldest presidents with the longest terms in office. There are deeply ingrained cultural undertones to this leadership gap reality in Africa.

Family cultures, societal norms, and values shape both perception and reality all around us in our global communities. In every culture, we need generation-bridge influencers to intentionally model the relationships of Moses and Joshua, Naomi and Ruth, Mordecai and Esther, Elizabeth and Mary, Paul and Timothy, and the many other beautiful intergenerational life stories that fill the biblical narrative. As Christians, the differences between the generations are great challenges—but the differences can also be hopeful opportunities for serving one another.

Bridging the generational gap between Christian leaders in global mission is critical for our faithful gospel stewardship. We serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who fulfilled his promise and purpose through all generations. We pray with the Apostle Paul for God to be glorified in every generation, forever and ever. Our commitment to generational integration flows from our biblical convictions. The more we know Christ, the more we have a heart for all his people, even those who are significantly older or younger than us.



Let's say you are in a leadership role either as an older or younger leader, but have not yet attempted to bridge the generational gap. What's are the first steps to take? How can you go from being a generational stranger to a generational friend?



1. Cultivate intentional friendships across generations.

Bridging the generational gap starts with showing interest in one another's lives. Leaders must learn from Jesus to come alongside others and befriend them. Learning to know one another in our natural contexts of life is foundational.

Perhaps for you, the starting place is setting up a regular time to meet with a younger leader who's been on your heart. Or maybe if you're a younger leader, you begin by befriending an older leader who has a shared interest. Don't be afraid: friendship is gospel work.



2. Integrate Scripture in your daily journey of faith.

Scripture is our only safe companion and compass. When leaders are saturated in Scripture, their friendships are too. Our relationships grow out of the Word, as do our passions.

Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, older leaders must learn to patiently listen to younger ones. And like Timothy, younger leaders must learn to be an example in faith and love for older leaders.

Often in this personal, relational way, entering the Scriptures together leaves all those involved with burning hearts and transformative visions of Christ in real-life situations. Differences are eclipsed by the greater unity of knowing Jesus together and loving one another deeply.



3. Commit to authentic whole-life mentoring, or find yourself a whole-life mentor.

Do you have a mentor? Or do you mentor someone? Consider praying for someone of a different generation that you can meet with regularly to share and pray with.

An important note is that in a mentoring relationship, leaders must share authentic stories from both the day and night seasons of life. When we focus only on our strengths and successes, we easily harvest discouragement. When we learn to share our weaknesses, we build understanding, grace, and truth rooted in our need for dependence on Christ and one another.

Generational friendships have born incredible fruit in the Lausanne Movement. Many Lausanne leaders today were mentored by Billy Graham and John Stott, who founded the Movement, and senior leaders have passed on their batons to friends of the next generation. It isn't just a top-down thing, however—younger leaders bring wisdom, creativity, and leadership to our boards, issue networks, initiatives, regional teams, and as part of our staff. We would be lost without both our older and younger generations, for we can only bring the whole gospel to the whole world when we do it as a family made up of all generations.

Spiritual friendships ask for vulnerability and mutuality. We must ask ourselves how we can intentionally bridge the generational leadership gap wherever we are, transforming generation-gap cultures in our families, churches, workplaces, and networks.

Today, after a few weeks of interaction within the Lausanne regional team, the younger leader on WhatsApp shares that she's realized what a privilege it is to journey with older leaders, 'to hear their hearts and listen to them be vulnerable about their regrets and the hopes they have for my generation.' Because of her interactions on the regional team, she's also felt challenged to be intentional about befriending people from the generation below her, 'who call me old to my face'.



As we meet and serve together across generations, generational strangers become generational friends. What's more, we come to know more intimately the friendship of our Lord and Saviour through these unlikely, gospel-centred friendships. For it is in friendships like these that we hear most clearly the treasured words of Jesus: 'I have called you friends' (John 15:15).

Pray with Us

Father God, thank you for the gift of generations and the uniqueness that each generation brings within the life of your church and your people. May you give us the courage and humility to undertake the important task of bridging the generation gap within our ministries, churches, and personal lives for the sake of your kingdom and the fulfilment of the Great Commission. May we be counted among those who boldly tell of your great works and mighty acts from one generation to another (Ps 145:4).

Endnotes

1. Generation Index & SyncLX, n.d. .↑.

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